
THE *LACHES*. J. Hardy (trans.) *Platon: Laches* . (Platon Werke Übersetzung und Kommentar 3.) Pp. 231. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014. Cased, €74.99. ISBN: 978-3-525-30418-1.

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THE *LACHES*

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Suppose you want your children to be a success – what should they learn to have the best chances in life? 'Go to uni' is the advice given by many parents. But to which university, and what should they study? Parents often rely on league tables without quite understanding what these tables measure, and why: the tables seem to be authoritative, and that is enough. Go back some 2,400 years to Athens and compare the pattern: to discuss what their sons should learn, two gentlemen ask the advice of two eminent statesmen, Nicias and Laches, who are thought to be authorities about success. More specifically, the question is whether their sons should learn martial arts, since excelling in battle is one way of being a success. On this question Laches and Nicias have opposing views. To settle the question, Socrates, as their independent advisor, digs deeper: what does it mean to be a success? And in what exactly do fighters excel? The answer is: courage. So, in order to make an informed decision about their sons' education the two gentlemen need to know first what courage is, and how it relates to being a success. This is the topic of the Plato's *Laches*.

H.'s translation of this dialogue reads well: it is accurate and conveys a good sense of the Greek. One small defect is the use of parentheses: while they are mostly used to supply missing subjects or verbs, they are sometimes intrusive (at 182a2–5 the addition of 'im Leben' seems gratuitous), and on at least one occasion an alternative translation seems to be offered: at 191e5 H. translates εἰ γάρ τις ἐθέλοι ἐν τῇ τάξει μένων ἀμύνεσθαι as 'Wenn einer bereit (entschlossen) ist auf seinem Posten zu bleiben und die Feinde abzuwehren'.

The substantial commentary (around 100 pages) is divided into five chapters, four of which comment on the text section by section, leaving one for the interpretation of the *Laches*. The commentary is prefaced with an introduction (28 pages). The introduction is, in my view, the weakest part of the book. However, this does not seriously affect the usefulness of the commentary. In the introduction H. sides with 'many respectable Plato scholars' in attempting a 'holistic or unitarian' interpretation of the Socratic dialogues (p. 45), according to which Plato develops a theory of the good life, which the interpreter can reconstruct by turning what Socrates holds true in the different dialogues into a coherent theory. While everybody agrees that comparing thematically connected dialogues with each other is helpful, not everybody agrees that Plato constructs a theory across various dialogues – a disagreement not even mentioned by H. Of course, seasoned Plato scholars know of this alternative, but students may not: H. does not give them enough material to decide for themselves how to read Plato's dialogues.

Part of H.'s holistic approach is Socratic eudaimonism (pp. 54–5) and a preconception of what philosophy is, so that he can divide the content of the *Laches* into philosophical and non-philosophical (p. 74), can write off some of Socrates' remarks as 'ironical' (p. 93) or 'humorous' (p. 97), and can contrast Socrates with non-philosophers, such as the Sophists: 'the Socratic criticism of the Sophists in Plato's dialogues has a clear philosophical and eudaimonistic message. The Sophists were apparently a wandering circus of overpaid and philosophically rather boring entertainers' (p. 84) – and this is because they are not interested in the truth (p. 85). This seems to me much too sweeping: it is clear from many dialogues that having a conversation with a Sophist can be philosophically rewarding. Again, students are presented with a one-sided view of a crucial set of questions (What is

philosophy? Who practises philosophy?), and will not be equipped to make up their own minds by reading H.'s book. This would not matter if the book were clearly addressed to specialists in ancient philosophy – but the explanations of *aporia* on pp. 52–3, or the section on the dating of the dialogue, pp. 65–8, for instance, seem to be addressed to beginners.

This one-sidedness, fortunately, does not mar the commentary. H. gives due attention to relevant alternative proposals when situating his own interpretation in the literature (esp. pp. 133–4; 140–5, 148–52). Two shadows that the introduction does cast, or rather its content, are (a) the quasi-formulaic use of 'eudaimonistic' (see e.g. p. 84, quoted above) and (b) a blind spot: at the end of the exchange between Nicias, Laches and Socrates, H. dismisses a question by Laches as 'misleading' and Nicias' answer as *ad hoc* (p. 118). But the question seems apposite, effectively asking whether Nicias' definition of courage as a certain kind of knowledge, knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful (*Laches* 194d–e), leaves out paradigmatic cases of courage, or whether it is revisionist. Note, however, that Socrates makes this point (196e1–9, *pace* H.); Laches merely sharpens it and insists that Nicias answer (197a1–5).

The bulk of the commentary is, sensibly, devoted to the final argument of the *Laches* (197e10–199e12), represented by H. in eight or alternatively nine steps (pp. 130–1). The crux of the argument is an apparent clash between the thesis that (a) courage is only a part of virtue, and Nicias' definition, which, if properly understood, amounts to the claim that courage is pretty much knowledge of all goods and evils (199c3–d1): with *that* knowledge nothing seems to be missing from virtue (d4–e1), so that (b) courage would be the whole of virtue (Οὐκ ἄρα, ὦ Νικία, μόριον ἀρετῆς ἂν εἴη τὸ νῦν σοι λεγόμενον, ἀλλὰ σύμπασα ἀρετή. – Ἔοικεν, 199e3–5). Hence, Socrates and Nicias agree that they have not found what courage is (199e11–12). What are we to make of this? According to H., we should not dismiss (a) or (b), but rather find a way in which they are compatible, revealing the clash to be only apparent. H.'s solution is that courage is indeed only a part of virtue, but represents the whole of virtue because the individual virtues are interdependent (pp. 136–7 and 140–1): all virtues require knowledge of all goods and evils; they differ only through their specific applications of this knowledge (pp. 154–60). While I am sympathetic to H.'s approach, his solution may unduly rest on a certain reading of the Greek that would require more justification than is given. While H. translates (b) correctly, he represents it in the argument as '(7) A person is courageous if and only if she is in an overall good state of the soul (199e3–5)' – which is not only considerably weaker than (b), but also does not clash with (a), and hence would give the interlocutors no reason to doubt Nicias' definition.

Despite this critical point, and the misgivings about the introduction, this is a good commentary. It is especially strong when the dialogue touches on issues that fall under social epistemology, such as the layperson's problem to identify an expert (p. 81) or epistemology more generally (see esp. pp. 197–211, part of an essay on the *Meno*). The most interesting recurring feature is the connection between knowledge and motivation in virtuous states (though motivation is absent from the index). According to H., 'courage . . . consists in the ability to master dangerous situations successfully', where courage is intrinsically tied to a second order motivation to form intentions in accordance with one's best knowledge of what is good, i.e. what is 'eudaimonistically desirable' (p. 167). This connection is further illuminated in an interesting essay on the *Protagoras* (pp. 170–90). Those who read German will benefit much from H.'s book – if they are able to keep a critical distance.

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